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Bangladesh's Leadership in BIMSTEC: Strategic Pathways to Indo-Pacific Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT: By taking the leadership in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh is at a crucial moment in its regional and global diplomatic history. As the organization increasingly adapts to the emerging Indo-Pacific strategic order, Bangladesh's two-year term presents both opportunities and challenges for advancing its national interests as well as fostering regional stability. This paper explores how Bangladesh could leverage its leadership capacity within BIMSTEC to enhance its diplomatic action and build strategic pathways toward the broader Indo-Pacific region. Employing a qualitative approach and drawing on an extensive secondary literature review, including the official websites of BIMSTEC and Bangladesh, policy papers, regional cooperation discourses, and newspapers, this article examines Bangladesh's leadership across three interrelated aspects: regional governance, strategic diplomacy, and economic connectivity. This article argues that Bangladesh's leadership will play an active role by focusing on shared growth, maritime security, and sustainable development in adherence with the tenets of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). In

addition, the study demonstrates how Bangladesh's "Bay of Bengal diplomacy" complements its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) and diversification of friendship beyond traditional powers. However, the study also proceeds structural limitations—institutional weaknesses within BIMSTEC, overlapping regional designs, and great-power rivalry—that may limit Bangladesh's potential. However, the article concludes with a remark that Bangladesh's BIMSTEC leadership offers a strategic window to project normative leadership, promote regional cohesion, and assert its voice in shaping an equitable Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: *Bangladesh, BIMSTEC, strategy, Indo-Pacific diplomacy, regional leadership, FOIP.*

1. Introduction

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organization comprising seven member states located along the coasts and neighbouring regions of the Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC was established on June 6, 1997, through the Bangkok Declaration. The economic bloc was first formed with four member nations, referred to as "BIST-EC" – Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation. After Myanmar's accession on December 22, 1997, in a special ministerial conference in Bangkok, the organization was renamed "BIMST-EC": Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation. Later in 2004, after the inclusion of Nepal and Bhutan, the name was changed to "BIMSTEC" (Islam, 2021). The organization strategically positions itself to unite South and Southeast Asia through its diverse range of cooperation areas, including trade expansion, security initiatives, climate resilience measures, and people-to-people engagement programs. It has emerged as a more effective platform for regional cooperation because of the ongoing deadlock within SAARC (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The strategic location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia has made Bangladesh the centerpiece and key leader of BIMSTEC operations. Bangladesh took over the BIMSTEC chairmanship at the Bangkok summit on April 4, 2025, for a two-year term (Star Online Report, 2025a). This leadership in BIMSTEC occurs during a period of increased geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region and amplified demands for inclusive multilateralism.

However, this enables Bangladesh to advance the accomplishment of the 'Bangkok Vision 2030', facilitating closer collaboration between Bangladesh and the broader region.

Indeed, regional integration is increasingly viewed as a dynamic catalyst for sustainable development and enhanced international competitiveness, rather than merely a mechanism for trade promotion (Singh, 2005). Bangladesh, influenced by Chief Adviser Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus's innovative "Three Zeros" framework – zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions – has become an active participant in the quest for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the promotion of an inclusive Indo-Pacific strategy (Islam & Uddin, 2025). Bangladesh's influential leadership in BIMSTEC underscores its commitment to enhancing regional connectivity, promoting energy cooperation, and encouraging economic integration across South and Southeast Asia. By leveraging influential platforms such as BIMSTEC, Dhaka positions itself as a crucial link between South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, thereby enhancing its significance to both regional and global authorities. However, geopolitical rivalry, institutional fragilities, and the delicate balance among India, China, and ASEAN pose substantial obstacles to maintaining and enhancing Bangladesh's leadership goals. This article critically analyzes how Bangladesh could leverage its leadership in BIMSTEC to enhance its regional integration, promote security collaboration, diplomatic action, and build strategic pathways toward the broader Indo-Pacific region.

2. Understanding the Indo-Pacific Construct and Strategic Role of BIMSTEC

The Indo-Pacific region refers to the convergence of the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and the Western and Central Pacific Oceans, encompassing the approximate area of Indonesia. The term "Indo-West" or "Indo-Pacific Asia" is also frequently used to refer to it (Hu & Meng, 2020). The US-led Indo-Pacific strategy is designed to guarantee a secure, open, and free region by emphasizing security, economic development, multilateral cooperation, and climate sustainability. Key players, including the United States, India, China, Japan, and ASEAN nations, have developed Indo-Pacific strategies that balance cooperation and competition (Islam & Uddin, 2025). This strategy is the United States' response to China's growing power.

To address this, the US is not only bolstering its military (internal balancing) power but also strengthening ties with old allies and forming new partnerships in the region (external balancing). Bangladesh is regarded as a critical ally in the Indo-Pacific region due to its strategic location in the northern Bay of Bengal, which is in proximity to the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Islam & Uddin, 2025). The United States, India, Japan, and Australia consider Bangladesh a critical component of their Indo-Pacific strategy due to its strategic location. Nevertheless, smaller states, such as Bangladesh, are also essential in preserving equilibrium, particularly through multilateral platforms like BIMSTEC (Islam & Uddin, 2025).

BIMSTEC is a regional organization established in 1997 and renamed in 2004 (Mohan, 2016). Its objective is to enhance collaboration among the seven South and Southeast Asian nations: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal. Its particular emphasis is on bridging the divide between SAARC and ASEAN. It prioritizes shared regional issues related to economic and social development above geopolitical matters. The presence of two substantial Asian economies—India and Thailand—balances the economic power within the group, providing reassurance to the other members and alleviating their concerns about domination (Palit et al., 2018). Additionally, BIMSTEC seeks to serve as a conduit between South and Southeast Asian countries, focusing on seven priority sectors of regional collaboration, each led by a specific nation: trade, investment, and development in Bangladesh; security in India; agriculture and food security in Myanmar; environment and climate change in Bhutan; science, technology, and innovation in Sri Lanka; people-to-people contact in Nepal; and connectivity in Thailand (Ahmed, 2024). Moreover, the BIMSTEC nations sought to create a free trade pact, while India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand pursued trade liberalization, acknowledging the region's economic potential (KAUL, 2006).

Sectors of cooperation of BIMSTEC include mainly trade, investment, and development; environment and climate change; security; agriculture and food security; people-to-people contact; science, technology, and innovation; and connectivity (BIMSTEC, 2025). Bangladesh, as a founding member and the home to the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, plays a crucial role in shaping the organization's

vision and direction. Bangladesh's taking charge of BIMSTEC for a two-year term will pave the path to working towards enhancing regional cooperation and development (UNB, 2025). Bangladesh's recent leadership in BIMSTEC signifies its overarching foreign policy objective of enhancing regional connectivity and collaboration, especially within the Indo-Pacific framework (Islam & Uddin, 2025).

3. Assessing Bangladesh's Broader Indo-Pacific Vision Through BIMSTEC

In recent years, Bangladesh has prioritized BIMSTEC in its regional diplomacy, broadening its emphasis on integration and connectivity. Bangladesh has been actively seeking foreign direct investment (FDI) as part of its trade and investment strategy to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty. The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement has been enacted to enhance border connectivity among the member nations (Biswas, 2020). In addition to its economic goals, Bangladesh proactively addresses climate change, combats transnational crime, and collaborates on counter-terrorism initiatives. Certainly, BIMSTEC could surpass SAARC in significance and influence if it effectively connects the inward-looking South Asia with the outward-focused Southeast and East Asia (Baru, 2004).

Sustainable development, peace, security, humanitarian action, and fundamental rights depend on regional and international collaboration, as outlined in Bangladesh's guiding principles for its Indo-Pacific outlook (MFA, 2023). Also, Bangladesh's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific aligns with its constitutional principles of sovereignty, equality, non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution, and adherence to international law. In its capacity as chair of BIMSTEC, Bangladesh will have the opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to regional cooperation by spearheading the organization through comprehensive activities across several sectors (Islam & Uddin, 2025).

3.1 Economic and social security

The primary focus of BIMSTEC is to promote rapid economic growth and social development throughout the Bay of Bengal region (BIMSTEC, 2024). According to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Bangladesh is promoting inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction through international commerce. Through

BIMSTEC, Bangladesh sees an opportunity to maximize economic security by advancing essential regional value chains in textile production, pharmaceutical development, and agricultural processing (Islam & Hossen, 2025).

The objectives of BIMSTEC are multifaceted. Nevertheless, it primarily emphasizes economic advancement through collaborative efforts. The objective encompasses fostering an environment conducive to swift economic advancement by identifying and executing specific collaborative projects, expediting economic growth and social progress in the Bay of Bengal region through equitable partnerships, encouraging active cooperation and mutual support on shared interests in economic, social, technical, and scientific domains, collaborating on projects best addressed regionally among BIMSTEC member states to optimize synergies, striving to eliminate poverty in the Bay of Bengal region, and enhancing trade and investment as a pivotal element for promoting economic and social development in the area (BIMSTEC, 2025). Furthermore, accurately allocating resources to growing sectors, such as semiconductors, electronics, and renewable energy, may entice foreign direct investment and facilitate knowledge transfer across member nations. Bangladesh has had an unparalleled increase in its youth population, promoting the development of a skilled workforce via IT training, entrepreneurship, and the expansion of small and medium enterprises. Moreover, enhanced coordination among BIMSTEC members might improve output and productivity, expand value chains, stabilize prices, and promote regional food security (M. Rahman & Farabi, 2024).

3.2 Infrastructure connectivity

Currently, the concept of "connectography" represents vital connections between transport and trade as more fundamental than geographic boundaries that guide regional cooperation (Biswas, 2020). BIMSTEC significantly enhances Bangladesh's infrastructure connectivity by fostering the construction of roads, railways, air routes, and waterways linking Bangladesh with other South and Southeast Asian nations. The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity outlines crucial routes across Bangladesh and incorporates them into broader regional networks (Biswas, 2020). A notable development in regional connectivity began with the ratification of the protocol for executing the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement in 2025 among

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, designed to enable the unrestricted transit of passenger, personal, and cargo vehicles among these nations (Financial Express, 2025). Despite progress in developing BIMSTEC land and maritime connectivity infrastructure, the organization has shown limited support for improving aviation infrastructure. As a BIMSTEC frontline leader, Bangladesh intends to improve its airport facilities and may seek BIMSTEC support to address the growing trade and tourism requirements resulting from this deficit.

3.3 Uniting against corruption and freedom of navigation

BIMSTEC is dedicatedly focused upholding peace and stability in the Bay of Bengal region by enhancing cooperation in addressing international terrorism and transnational organized crimes (BIMSTEC, 2025). The anti-corruption initiatives largely emphasize global collaboration to address corruption, a significant impediment to sustainable development and effective government. A Free and Open Indo-Pacific needs a comprehensive strategy to address authoritarianism, since corruption often functions as both a mechanism and a result of authoritarian dominance (Yadav & Mukherjee, 2018). As a dedicated member state, Bangladesh aims to combat corruption and contribute to the global anti-corruption initiative, thereby promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region. In 2025, with a firm stance of zero tolerance, Bangladesh and Thailand signed an MOU to foster international cooperation in the fight against corruption jointly (The Daily Star, 2025). To institutionalize these efforts, Bangladesh needs to strengthen the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) with full autonomy and authority. However, being a crime-ridden zone, it is challenging to fight against the syndicate of corruption alone. Therefore, active and deliberate participation by all member states is essential to combat crime in this region.

Moreover, BIMSTEC aims to build multidimensional connectivity and foster synergy across regional connectivity frameworks as a crucial facilitator of economic integration for collective benefit (BIMSTEC, 2025). To enhance international commerce and economic collaboration, Bangladesh needs to improve the freedom of navigation and the safety and security of maritime communication routes in the Indian Ocean. Terrorism, piracy, human trafficking, and drug smuggling constitute

significant security issues, necessitating collective efforts to address these threats. As a leader of BIMSTEC, Bangladesh can establish a comprehensive security architecture grounded on mutual trust and partnership, particularly with its neighbors, India and Myanmar (Islam & Uddin, 2025). In this regard, securing marine channels will be crucial for achieving collective prosperity and stability throughout the region.

3.4 Armed forces of Bangladesh modernization blueprint

The military's power is evident in Bangladesh, and, as a country formerly governed by military regimes, it remains involved in contentious politics and continues to exert significant influence on nations (Pattanaik, 2021). Bangladesh has the third most formidable armed forces in South Asia, ranking as the region's most militarily proficient non-nuclear weapons state, following India and Pakistan (Rejwan, 2024). Due to its policy of non-alignment and strategic balancing with global and regional powers, maintaining a military with competent personnel and modern weapons has consistently been a vital objective for strengthening Bangladesh's deterrent. Moreover, the Bangladesh Armed Forces has actively participated in hundreds of UN peacekeeping missions since 1988, establishing itself as one of the foremost troop-contributing nations in global UN Peacekeeping missions (Krishnasamy, 2003). Moreover, they rendered substantial efforts and sacrifices to guarantee the success of each operation and to showcase the skills of Bangladeshi Peacekeepers on the international arena.

The interim administration of Bangladesh has requested change in essential national sectors and institutions, including the police, courts, and constitution (Karim, 2024). The military modernization plan, Forces Goal 2030, seeks to enhance the three branches of the Armed Forces of Bangladesh—namely, the Army, Navy, and Air Force—as part of this broader reform initiative (Rejwan, 2024). The blueprint emphasizes reconfiguring military formations, increasing manpower, establishing new units, combining modern weapons with appropriate training, modifying military doctrines, and bolstering the defense industrial base for indigenous production, including through technology transfers. Given these objectives, it can be called a holistic approach to building the Armed Forces of Bangladesh into a 21st-century

capable force. As a BIMSTEC leader, it is widely believed that Bangladesh's military modernization will enhance its national security and contribute to group security initiatives and regional stability. Moreover, these modernizations might strengthen its credibility in proposing and coordinating defense diplomacy initiatives, naval cooperation frameworks, and joint military exercises within the BIMSTEC framework.

3.5 Strengthening global climate cooperation

Acknowledging the detrimental effects on the lives and livelihoods of individuals and the significant threats to the region, the BIMSTEC leaders consented to explore collaborative initiatives and bolster cooperation in environmental protection and sustainable development within the Environment and Climate Change Sector (ECC) (BIMSTEC, 2025). Additionally, the BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on ECC has finalized an action plan that consists of three priority areas: biodiversity, waste management, and climate change (BIMSTEC, 2025). In recent times, countries bordering the Indian Ocean have been facing climate change risks and vulnerabilities, necessitating coordinated efforts and a particular focus on adaptation measures to minimize their impacts. Chief Adviser of Bangladesh, Dr. Muhammad Yunus's "Three Zeros" concept might significantly catalyze the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 13 – Climate Action (Zaman, 2025). During the COP29 climate summit, Muhammad Yunus announced that Bangladesh is ready to collaborate with the 'Climate Club', an international initiative focused on advancing global climate cooperation and facilitating industrial decarbonization (UNB, 2024). In addition, he called for increased international cooperation, technology transfer, and concessional (low-interest) financing to assist developing nations in the adoption of green technologies, as well as measures such as carbon border adjustments (taxing imports based on their carbon footprint).

Moreover, Professor Yunus advocated four initiatives, including facilitating comprehensive engagement of BIMSTEC nations and people in the knowledge domain to develop, innovate, and disseminate their extensive capabilities. Furthermore, he encouraged the creation of an ecosystem in which entities outside government might collaborate with BIMSTEC to address urgent concerns, including

public health, natural disasters, and climate adaptation (The Financial Express, 2025). As a proactive, leading partner, Bangladesh aims to support climate projects across the Bay of Bengal region, enhance access to climate funding, and support regional adaptation plans. It hopes to set a good example and ensure a safer, more environmentally friendly future for the entire area. Bangladesh is coordinating with BIMSTEC and advancing these initiatives through its own environmental laws, policies, and plans.

4 Understanding BIMSTEC in Accelerating Development as a Sub-regional Forum

The primary aim of establishing this alliance of seven nations is to achieve collective, expedited development through collaborative efforts across several areas of shared interest, leveraging the momentum of globalization and regional resources and geographic advantages. The primary aim of BIMSTEC, as articulated in the Bangkok Declaration of 1997, is to foster an environment conducive to swift economic development by identifying and executing targeted cooperation initiatives in trade, investment, industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and transportation (Kipgen & Chakrabarti, 2022).

The draft charter of BIMSTEC designates Bangladesh as the lead nation for trade and investment; Bhutan for environmental and climate issues; India for security matters, encompassing counter-terrorism, transnational crime, and energy; Myanmar for agriculture and food security; Nepal for cultural and tourism-related people-to-people interactions; Sri Lanka for science, technology, and innovation; and Thailand for connectivity (Islam, 2021). Experts assert that the Bay of Bengal, as a vital conduit between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, amplifies the significance of BIMSTEC in influencing geopolitical and geostrategic discourse in the area and beyond. It has consistently developed into a proficient regional cooperation and integration platform in the Bay of Bengal.

4.1 Key steps undertaken by BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC has undertaken numerous timely key steps over the years to establish itself as a genuine regional platform. It has finalized several significant agreements, including the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area in 2004, the

BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking in 2009, and the Memorandum of Understanding to establish BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection in 2018 (Ali & Medhekar, 2022; Strutt, 2008). In 2014, BIMSTEC established its permanent secretariat in Dhaka, thereby formalizing the framework for this regional conference. According to the official data provided on its website, four specialized centers, including the BIMSTEC Center for Weather and Climate (India), the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (Bhutan), the BIMSTEC Energy Center (India), and the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (Sri Lanka), are at different operational levels. BIMSTEC is progressively integrating its initiatives with the endeavors of its member nations to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on August 30-31, 2018, reaffirmed its commitment to eradicating poverty in member nations by 2030, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sarkar, 2022). The fourth summit urged all sectors to intensify their efforts towards the overarching objective of poverty eradication. BIMSTEC is working to enhance cooperation with the UN system, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank to achieve this objective by 2030 (Islam, 2021).

4.2 BIMSTEC in facilitating regional development

BIMSTEC has a vast opportunity to facilitate regional development through trade and economic integration, market access, customs harmonization, connectivity and infrastructure development, energy cooperation, poverty reduction and inclusive growth, disaster management and climate resilience, security and stability, science, technology, and education cooperation, as well as geostrategic and diplomatic balancing. The delayed BIMSTEC FTA discussions have been restarted after a several-year break, marking Bangladesh's active involvement (Islam, 2019). BIMSTEC asserts that a robust transport network is essential for reaping the benefits of a free trade area, encompassing the enhancement of commerce and investment, as well as advancements in other cooperative domains. The majority of member countries have initiated the implementation of 167 projects, estimated to cost approximately $50 billion, identified by the ADB-supported BIMSTEC Transport

Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) of 2014, to rectify the missing links and enhance physical and economic connectivity between South and Southeast Asia (Islam, 2021).

Moreover, the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (2004) lays the foundation for reducing tariffs and enhancing intra-regional trade. It offers its member nations easy access to markets, simplifying cross-border trade procedures, promoting smoother logistics, and fostering greater investor confidence, thereby bridging two dynamic economic regions and offering diverse markets and resources. Projects like the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) aim to build multi-modal corridors across land, sea, and air (Yhome, 2017). The 2018 MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection facilitates the development of shared electricity transmission infrastructure, thereby helping to address power shortages and enhance energy security. It also promotes ICT-based cooperation, encouraging innovation and digital inclusion (Bal, 2017). Additionally, joint energy initiatives can drive industrial growth, including hydropower and solar energy cooperation among Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. Shared best practices and agricultural research cooperation can promote food security and sustainable livelihoods. Most notably, the tourism industry is now at the forefront of development initiatives, and thus, BIMSTEC can promote sustainable tourism that generates employment and fosters socio-cultural integration.

Additionally, the member countries are prone to natural disasters, including droughts, cyclones, floods, and earthquakes. Although BIMSTEC facilitates joint early warning systems and capacity-building for disaster preparedness and climate adaptation strategies, it may also foster cooperation in this field, thereby making countries more sustainable. Moreover, through the 2009 Convention on Combating Terrorism and Transnational Crime, BIMSTEC enhances border cooperation and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal (Uddin et al., 2023). Also, BIMSTEC supports joint research initiatives, capacity-building programs, and scholarships in science and technology. Indeed, BIMSTEC's true significance lies in its ability to link South and Southeast Asia, thereby facilitating trade and commerce, energy, security, and climate change adaptation. Over the last decade, India has shown a

strong interest in establishing sub-regional groupings, such as BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Project (MGC), for several reasons, including serving as an alternative to SAARC, competing with China, and gaining strategic benefits from improved ties with Myanmar (Kaul, 2006). However, the organization still faces some difficulties, but its focus on specific sectors and flexible structure make it a good regional growth and integration platform. The member countries collaborate in various areas. However, the collaboration must be at the highest level so that member countries can maximize their benefits by working together.

4.3 Fundamental obstacles hindering BIMSTEC

Historically, the Bay of Bengal has served as a center for global maritime commerce and a nexus of economic and cultural exchange. Endowed with such advantages, BIMSTEC is endeavoring to reestablish historical connectivity to enhance commerce and investment, tourism, interpersonal relations, and cultural exchange, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the region. However, several fundamental obstacles hinder the organization 's growth. Regrettably, BIMSTEC has not transcended the constraints of its formative phase, as the member nations have intentionally neglected to create an institutional framework to accelerate collaboration during the last two and a half decades. The seven-member nations of BIMSTEC haven't been able to approve a charter since its establishment. However, the BIMSTEC Charter became effective on May 20, 2024, following long efforts (BIMSTEC, 2024).

The absence of institutional mechanisms, the limited authority of the BIMSTEC secretariat, bilateral disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar—particularly regarding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees—and China's regional influence amid the India-China rivalry are obstructing the BIMSTEC process. Regional organization s struggle to succeed when member nations remain mired in geopolitical interests (Islam, 2021). The two neighboring countries of Bangladesh often adopt inflexible stances on several cross-border issues, including India's stance on transboundary water and Myanmar's stance on migration. Moreover, the BIMSTEC member nations are anticipated to develop Rules of Procedure for their routine activities. Bangladesh is diligently striving to use regional and global influence to

achieve a peaceful resolution to the growing crisis, despite the support of China and India for Myanmar regarding the Rohingya crisis. Both nations own significant geopolitical and economic interests in Myanmar. Russia seems to have sympathy for Myanmar over this matter. Nonetheless, substantial obstacles to regional integration within BIMSTEC exist due to fragile political institutions and escalating human rights abuses.

5 Discussion

The moment for BIMSTEC to assume a more significant role in fostering peace, prosperity, and sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal area is unequivocally at hand. To enhance the efficacy of BIMSTEC, sustainable development, security, stability, and people-to-people contact are all timely and necessary. Member nations must reaffirm their strong commitment to strengthening collaborative efforts in achieving the objectives and purposes of BIMSTEC, thereby improving the region's population. With the revitalized political commitment of the member nations, analysts anticipate that BIMSTEC will surmount obstacles and establish itself as a credible regional platform. Bangladesh will benefit through its leadership in the association and will play a vital role in the Indo-Pacific region.

Through active engagement, Bangladesh aims to foster a free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, thereby enhancing regional solidarity, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring strategic stability. Undoubtedly, taking charge as a chairman has multiple benefits for any country. The last summit opened many doors for practical cooperation. The adoption of the BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030 is the first vision document of BIMSTEC, offering a detailed and pragmatic framework for future collaboration among member states to realize the objective of a prosperous, resilient, and open BIMSTEC. Furthermore, signing the agreement on marine transport cooperation represents a significant advancement in developing regional partnerships to enhance marine connectivity, thereby facilitating increased commerce and tourism among the member states. Moreover, collaboration among the coastal nations of the Indian Ocean serves the interests of these governments, whose economies are fundamentally reliant on the seas and maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is the principal organization

dedicated to fostering cooperation across the Indian Ocean region in economic, political, and security areas (Ogutu, 2021). Therefore, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between BIMSTEC and the IORA, as well as between BIMSTEC and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), will formalize collaborations in areas of mutual interest. As the chairman, Bangladesh will have an excellent opportunity to reflect on its thoughts throughout the organization.

As a leading partner of BIMSTEC, Bangladesh demonstrates its dedication to fostering inclusive, action-oriented regional collaboration. Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus emphasizes that member states must unite their efforts to enhance BIMSTEC's capacities for economic unification, disaster preparedness, and sustainable development initiatives. A key element of the 2025 summit focused on developing trade partnerships and disaster relief capabilities. BIMSTEC shows optimistic signs for its future development, mainly because Bangladesh is taking up leadership, which could position it as a modern platform that goes beyond traditional blocs to achieve its initial goal. Bangladesh's leading position will be vital for advancing BIMSTEC goals and strengthening interstate solidarity. Moreover, regarding social security in the BIMSTEC area, Bangladesh should spearhead projects in food and health security by supporting cooperative frameworks, including a regional food security task force, encouraging sustainable agriculture, traditional medicine, and environmentally friendly technologies. Besides, as Bangladesh seeks to join ASEAN, it will create a new avenue for negotiating with Thailand, a prominent member of BIMSTEC. It is hoped that under Bangladesh's leadership, regional cooperation will reach a new dimension through the platform.

6 Conclusion

Bangladesh's leadership in BIMSTEC marks a significant moment in its diplomatic development and regional engagement, coming at a time when the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of global strategic competition and collaboration. At the moment, Bangladesh's leadership highlights its growing diplomatic maturity, seeking to serve as a bridge between SAARC's stalled regionalism and ASEAN's dynamic economic and political cooperation. The paper posits that BIMSTEC offers a realistic

and politically viable framework for Bangladesh to realize its goals within the Indo-Pacific Outlook. BIMSTEC's multi-sectoral strategy, encompassing commerce, transport, climate change, security, and technology, offers Bangladesh a unique opportunity to combine economic diplomacy with strategic insight. Bangladesh's leadership vision embodies the "Three Zeros" concept proposed by Muhammad Yunus, which corresponds with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the overarching Indo-Pacific framework of inclusion and sustainability. Viewed from this perspective, Bangladesh's diplomatic initiatives are perceived not just as reactive but also as transformational, establishing the nation as a burgeoning leader in the international Indo-Pacific framework.

Nevertheless, this leadership journey is marked by challenges stemming from BIMSTEC's institutional weaknesses, historical inactivity, and overlapping memberships with other regional blocs. These will continue to massively hinder its operational efficiency. Everlasting bilateral disputes, especially concerning refugee crises, migration, and water-sharing, and big-power conflicts between India and China further complicate regional cooperation. For Bangladesh, passing these challenges requires careful diplomatic balancing, deepening cooperation with India and ASEAN, while maintaining neutrality in the broader Indo-Pacific power politics. Despite these constraints, Bangladesh's leadership can turn into a strategic catalyst for regional transformation, demonstrating the country's eagerness to operationalize soft power and economic diplomacy. Bangladesh's modernization of its armed forces and its emphasis on climate cooperation within BIMSTEC highlight its proactive role in promoting peace and shared adaptation and green transformation, fostering global sustainability norms.

Bangladesh's leadership in BIMSTEC both a strategic opportunity and a policy challenge, establishing the nation as a responsible regional leader and a link between the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indo-Pacific. To realize this potential, Bangladesh must institutionalize BIMSTEC reforms, improve policy coordination among members, and advance collective security and economic initiatives that go beyond narrow national interests. If well managed, this leadership period might transform Bangladesh's diplomatic position—from a peripheral South Asian player to a central

actor in the Indo-Pacific, committed to promoting a resilient, cohesive, and sustainable regional future.

Indeed, during its tenure, Bangladesh will inevitably face numerous challenges. However, with strategic foresight and effective leadership, it has the potential to elevate BIMSTEC to a position of regional significance. However, the overall success of BIMSTEC's initiatives will largely depend on the genuine cooperation and commitment of its member states.

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